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ABSTRACT

Based on the premise that fortune telling is a spontaneous narrative exercise, this paper proposes that the Tarot deck is a marvelously intricate and finely tooled mechanism for generating innumerable, remarkably coherent stories in the archetypal mode. It explains the organization of the Tarot deck, the 78 cards and their meanings, and the symbolism attached to individual cards and groups of cards. The paper also shows how the basic elements of narrative--plot, character, setting or situation, style, symbolism, and theme--are all inherent in and arise from the structure of a Tarot reading. The conclusion of the paper relates how Tarot reading has been used successfully as an instructional technique, one that shows writing students the ways in which basic narrative elements can be combined and recombined in myriads of ways to create stories. Illustrations of selected Tarot cards are appended. (RL)

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Tarot Reading as Recombinant Narrative: Literature as Game/Game as Literature

By
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The Tarot deck, which probably originated in ancient Egypt, was rediscovered in Europe in the middle ages, and shows unmistakable Hebraic, Eastern, and Christian influences in its rich symbolism, contains seventy-eight cards. Each card depicts a unique figure or scene that, iconographically as well as through numerological and more superficial visual interpretation, reveals its meaning. The deck is divided into two parts: the "minor arcana" and the "major arcana"; the word "arcana," of course, deriving from the same Latin root as our word "arcane," means "mysterious," "secret or hidden," or "the great secrets of nature." The larger portion of the deck, the minor arcana, contains fifty-six cards arranged into four suits of fourteen cards each. These are the forerunners of the modern deck of playing cards. Each suit has an ace through ten and four court cards: a page (unrepresented in modern playing cards and thus the extra or fourteenth card in each suit), a knight (our modern jack), a queen, and a king. The four suits correspond to our modern suits: the Tarot's suit of wands (or rods) is analogous to clubs; cups, to hearts; swords, to spades; and pentacles (or coins), to diamonds. There are also twenty-two major arcana cards. While the minor arcana deal with more mundane matters, the major arcana represent more cosmic archetypes and deeper mysteries. Each of these cards has a title and a number, from zero

to twenty-one. Only one of the major arcana cards, "The Fool, "whose number is zero and who has been transformed into the joker, corresponds to any modern card. The Tarot deck is generally used in fortune telling.

Fortune telling, of course, is a spontaneous narrative exercise, and (leaving mysticism aside) the Tarot deck is a marvelously intricate and finely-tooled mechanism for generating innumerable, remarkably coherent stories in the archetypal mode. The basic elements of narrative are plot, character, setting or situation, style, symbolism, and theme; all these elements are inherent in and arise from the structure of a Tarot reading. The skeleton outline of the plot is provided by the method of divination chosen, which might range from a simple spread of only seven cards, designed to yield answers to "yes or no" questions, to a highly complex and time-consuming layout of all seventy-eight cards, in which as many aspects of the seeker's past, present, and future life are revealed and interrelated. This skeletal plot, in a sense a system of "empty" story points, often ordered chronologically, is fleshed out or "filled" by the meanings of the specific cards that fall into each of its pre-established positions. Each card represents either, one, an aspect of character or a personality type (usually the court cards in the minor arcana and the first third or so of the major arcana), two, an emotional state (some of the minor arcana and roughly the second two-thirds of the major arcana), or, three, a human activity, social situation, or response (almost all of the minor arcana that are not court cards and a few of the major arcana):

that is, character and situation. Style is injected by the reader, who bears the responsibility of interpreting the meaning of each card in each vacant plot point and of interconnecting these interpretations to actually form the narrative per se. Symbolism is the most basic aspect of the Tarot and is inherent in the cards themselves in a variety of ways: the suggestive meaning of each suit, the numerological significance of each card in a suit, the titles of the major arcana cards, and the iconography of each card's picture. Each card's meaning is actually derived from this symbolism. Indeed, A. E. Waite, an authority on Tarot, notes that "the true Tarot is symbolism. It speaks no other language and presents no other signs." On one level, the reader extracts the theme of any reading from the particular narrative he creates. The deck as a whole, however, as it presents an epic panorama of human archetypes, states of being, and preoccupations, has as an inherent theme the diversity of human possibilities and the near-infinite potentiality of their interaction and combination.

Let's look more closely at the cards to illustrate how their meanings are derived from their symbolic contents. The meaning of each card is only vaguely defined and is open to interpretation; thus, the task of interpretation is much more an art or skill than a mere rote exercise. In general, however, rods or wands represent growth and enterprise; they are associated with creative energy or the development of plans. Cups represent happiness, emotional life, love, and beauty; as they are associated with water, they also symbolize the subconscious mind and the instincts. Swords represent force, ambition, courage, strife, and misfortune; the suit of swords is the world of action and its consequences for good or ill. Pentacles represent money, industry, and

material advantage; as they are associated with coins, they depict people working or enjoying the fruits of labor. As the numbered cards in the minor arcana progress from one to ten, they tend to represent a greater degree of involvement with the material world. Thus, the ace is the most idealized representation of the meaning of each suit, while the ten tends to be the fullest manifestation of that meaning in concrete reality. Twos can mean balance; threes, growth or attainment; and fours, logic, reason, or perfection. Fives signify uncertainty, change, and misfortune. Sixes represent harmony and equilibrium; sevens, wisdom or completion; eights, progress, regeneration, and the balance of opposing forces; and nines, a marshalling of forces on the physical, mental, and spiritual levels, looking towards the fullness of the tens. The court cards represent archetypal personalities appropriate to the suit and station in life portrayed. As any card can appear either right-side-up or reversed, each has two distinct ranges of meaning. While the reversed meaning is often the opposite of the primary meaning, it is sometimes merely complementary or a variation.

The ten of wands, for example, depicts a man staggering towards his city under the burden of ten staves. It represents a situation. This card could mean oppression, being too heavily burdened, or fatigue under pressure. It could also mean toiling at a problem soon to be solved. The reverse meaning could be a variation of this meaning, such as intrigue, difficulties, or losses, or it could be an opposite meaning, such as lightness of heart. However, reverse meanings are usually negative, even in cards whose primary meanings, like this one, are preponderantly negative.

The page of wands, a court card, depicts a fair youth with a staff proceeding on a journey. It represents a personality type or an event. It symbolizes a quick, active, intelligent youth who is full of enthusiasm and is a bearer of tidings. It can also represent the arrival of good news or the reception of testimony in one's favor. Reversed, it means either a cruel, unstable, superficial, gossiping personality or the receipt of bad news.

The two of cups portrays two young people, a man and a woman, toasting one another. It signifies the beginning of a friendship or love affair, companionship, or balance of masculine and feminine qualities in an integrated personality. Reversed, it means love turning to hatred, misunderstanding, too-violent passion, or loss of balance in a relationship.

The king of cups is a mature man with light brown hair and hazel eyes. He holds a cup and a scepter; he is seated on a throne that rests on a turbulent sea, in which a dolphin leaps and a ship rests at anchor. Like most court cards, this one represents a personality type: a man of business, law, or divinity who is interested in the arts and sciences, is considerate, and is willing to assume responsibility. Covering his emotional nature with a calm exterior, he enjoys quiet power. Reversed, this card denotes a powerful man who is crafty and violent; he is prone to double dealing, conceals his fierce nature under a calm exterior, and may be tainted by scandal.

The three of swords is a heart pierced by three swords set against a stormy sky. It depicts the fullness of sorrow and represents separation from a loved one, alienation of affection, or divorce. It can also mean civil war

or rupture in the family. Reversed, the meaning is similar but not so extreme: disorder, disharmony, confusion, loss, or upheaval.

The eight of swords shows a bound and blindfolded maiden. She is in a marshy area circumscribed by cliffs, and she is also surrounded by eight swords embedded in the ground. This card represents bondage or entrapment in one's situation, the feeling of limited options, and lack of freedom of choice. Reversed, this card means freedom, the possibility of new beginnings, or escape from a suffocating situation.

The eight of pentacles, on the other hand, signifies in the primary position apprenticeship or new beginnings in a trade or work. It portrays a young sculptor carving some simple pentacles. Reversed, this card suggests ill use of one's skills, danger of failure in one's ambitions, false vanity, deceitful practices, or intrigue.

The three of pentacles shows a sculptor completing an intricate carving in a church. It represents mastery in one's craft or a skilled artist, and suggests material gain. Reversed, this card signifies lack of skill, commonplace ideals or ambitions, or preoccupation with material gain at the expense of good work or aesthetic values.

Several of the major arcana, such as "Strength," "Justice," and "Temperance," simply represent ideal, virtuous qualities. The reverse meanings of these cards, logically are weakness, prejudice or lawlessness, and lack of moderation or bad management of affairs. Other cards in the major arcana, however, are not as obvious and depend on a wealth of iconographic symbols for their meanings.

"The Fool" is a vagabond carrying a flower and a staff, from which is suspended a sack of posessions. He heedlessly wanders near the edge of a precipice, a dog cavorting at his heels, yet enjoys the sunlight of early morning. Representing every man in his journey through life, "The Fool" particularly stands for the necessity of making a choice and of choosing wisely, a state of innocent harmony with

one's self and one's surroundings, the possibility of joy and adventure coupled with the equal possibility that disaster may follow, and the idea that life is always new and offers constant opportunities. Reversed, this card means thoughtless action or faulty choice, fear restraining one from accepting new opportunities, or folly and indiscretion.

"The High Priestess" is a pale woman in mystic garb seated between two pillars of wisdom. A veil between the pillars separates her from the world outside her temple of knowledge. She holds a scroll of esoteric lore in her lap, wears a solar cross on her breast and a symbol of the full moon, with a waxing moon on one side and a waning moon on the other, in her headdress, and has a crescent moon, enmeshed in the folds of her gown, at her feet. She represents insight devoid of feeling. Commanding a vast and deep knowledge and secure power, she is passionless and retreats from the external world of men into her secret wisdom. While she teaches and instructs others, she does not share in their lives. This card represents the powers of the unconscious but may also signify frigidity. Reversed, this card stands for passion without love, superficiality, and a life of indulgence and outward display. It may also mean a selfish, ruthless woman who uses her power to achieve her twisted ends through the destruction of others.

"Death" is an armored skeleton on a white horse. He tramples the fallen underfoot, and others turn away from him in dread. However, he also carries a banner that depicts a rose in bloom. In the background is a flowing river and the sun rising between two towers. Not a thoroughly negative card, "Death" symbolizes destruction followed by renewal, the passing away of the old to make way

for the birth of what is new, transformation, change, and the ceaseless, orderly cycle of nature. Reversed, however, the card signifies stagnation or inertia, disaster (even death), revolution, or anarchy.

"The Tower" signifies sudden, radical, unforeseen, and complete, probably catastrophic, change. It is a total upheaval and disruption that might, however, bring enlightenment in its wake. It depicts a tower rising from craggy rocks amid a raging sea whose summit, having just been struck and shattered by lightning, is aflame. A man and woman are falling from the top of the tower. The reverse meaning of this card, like that of the three of swords, is a diluted variant of the primary meaning: the gain of physical or mental freedom at excessive cost. This card can also mean oppression or imprisonment, if reversed.

The final card in the deck is "The World." Framed inside an oval wreath entwined with ribbons is a dancing woman. She is dressed only in a loose veil and holds a wand in each hand. Her arms and head form a triangle, and her legs are crossed. In the four corners of the card, outside the wreath, are the heads of a man, an eagle, a lion, and an ox, the symbols of the four evangelists. This card represents enlightenment, the state of true apprehension of all things and their meanings, the complete penetration and interrelation of the spheres of reality and symbol. Reversed, this card may mean lack of vision, fear of change or travel, or success not yet achieved.

Some of the one hundred and fifty-six possible sets of meanings must yet be placed in a framework if a coherent narrative is to be generated from them. For instance, in the Keltic method of divination, by far the most popular, only ten cards, randomly chosen and ordered, are used. Before the reading, one other card is chosen to represent the seeker, the protagonist of the narrative, and the entire

reading is built on this card; normally, one of the sixteen court cards will be used, but any card that seems particularly appropriate or that appeals to the seeker will do. After the seeker, while concentrating on his question, shuffles the remaining seventy-seven cards in the deck, the reader turns them over and one by one and extemporaneously builds the story by interpreting each card as it appears in its assigned position, concurrently interrelating the now "filled" plot points.

The first card denotes the seeker's present position or situation relative to the question posed. The second card signifies an already existing or a closely impending influence that will either reinforce or run counter to the present position. The third card, the destiny of the seeker, actually answers the question; it tells what the seeker's position relative to his question will be at the end of the time period in which he was interested. The fourth card reveals a distant past event or an ingrained character trait of the seeker's that is important in forming the present position as it will develop into this destiny. The fifth card stands for a recent past event that is similarly relevant to the present and future. The sixth card corresponds to a future event, occurring between the present moment and the period of time in question, that will be a catalyst in transforming the present situation and its crossing influence into the predicted destiny. The seventh card reveals the seeker's attitude towards his present position and its possibilities. The eighth card denotes the influence the seeker will have over others or that others will have over him in the future period in question. The ninth card uncovers the secret hopes, fears, and desires the seeker has regarding the substance of his question. And the tenth card transcends the particular question and time period involved to foretell how the examined facet of the seeker's life,as it will develop, will influence his life as a whole in a period of time further in the future than that

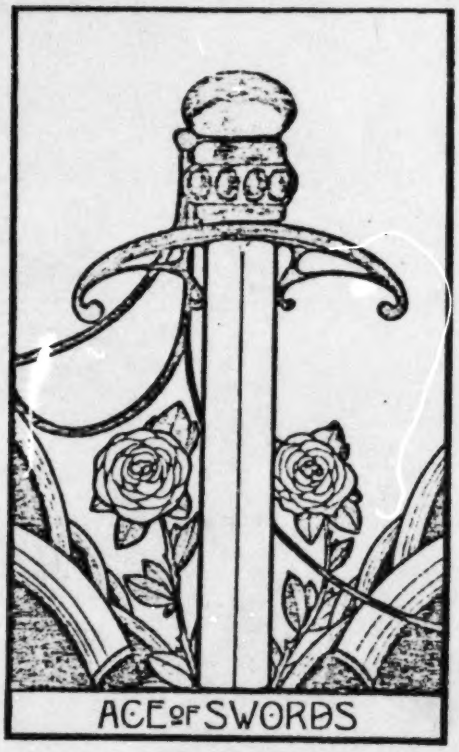
in which he was interested.

Through explaining Tarot in this way and then performing spontaneous readings for volunteers from the class, I have had marked success, in introduct ry classes in narrative, fiction, and creative writing of fiction, demonstrating how plot, character, setting, symbolism, style, and theme are combined to create narrative. The proof that Tarot is actually an exercise in recombinant narrative is, likewise, in the performance itself, which is in its essence extemporaneous.

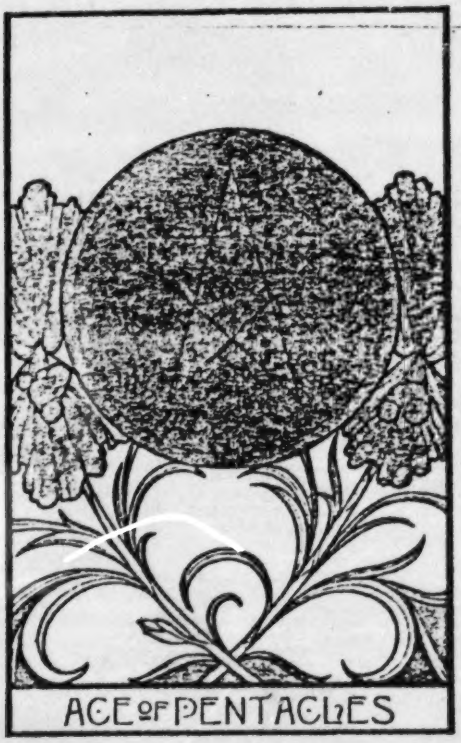
(1)

(2)

ACE of SWORDS.


ACE OF SWORDS

ACE of PENTACLES


ACE OF PENTACLES

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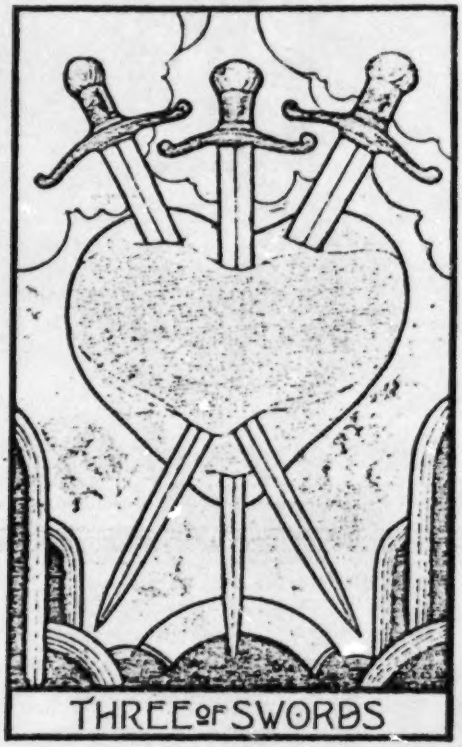

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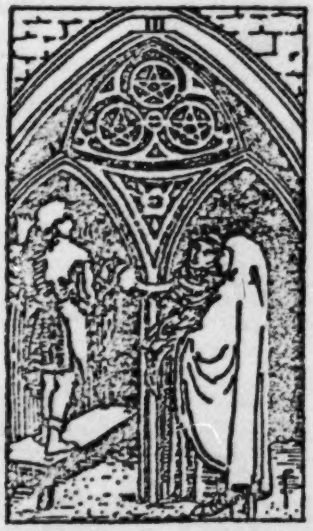


(7)

KEY 0

THE FOOL

(8)

KEY 2

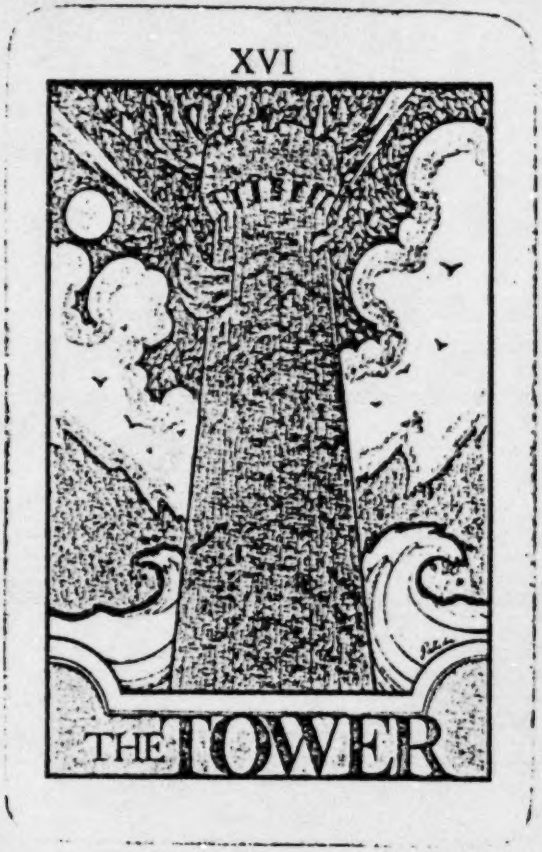
THE HIGH PRIESTESS

KEY 13

DEATH

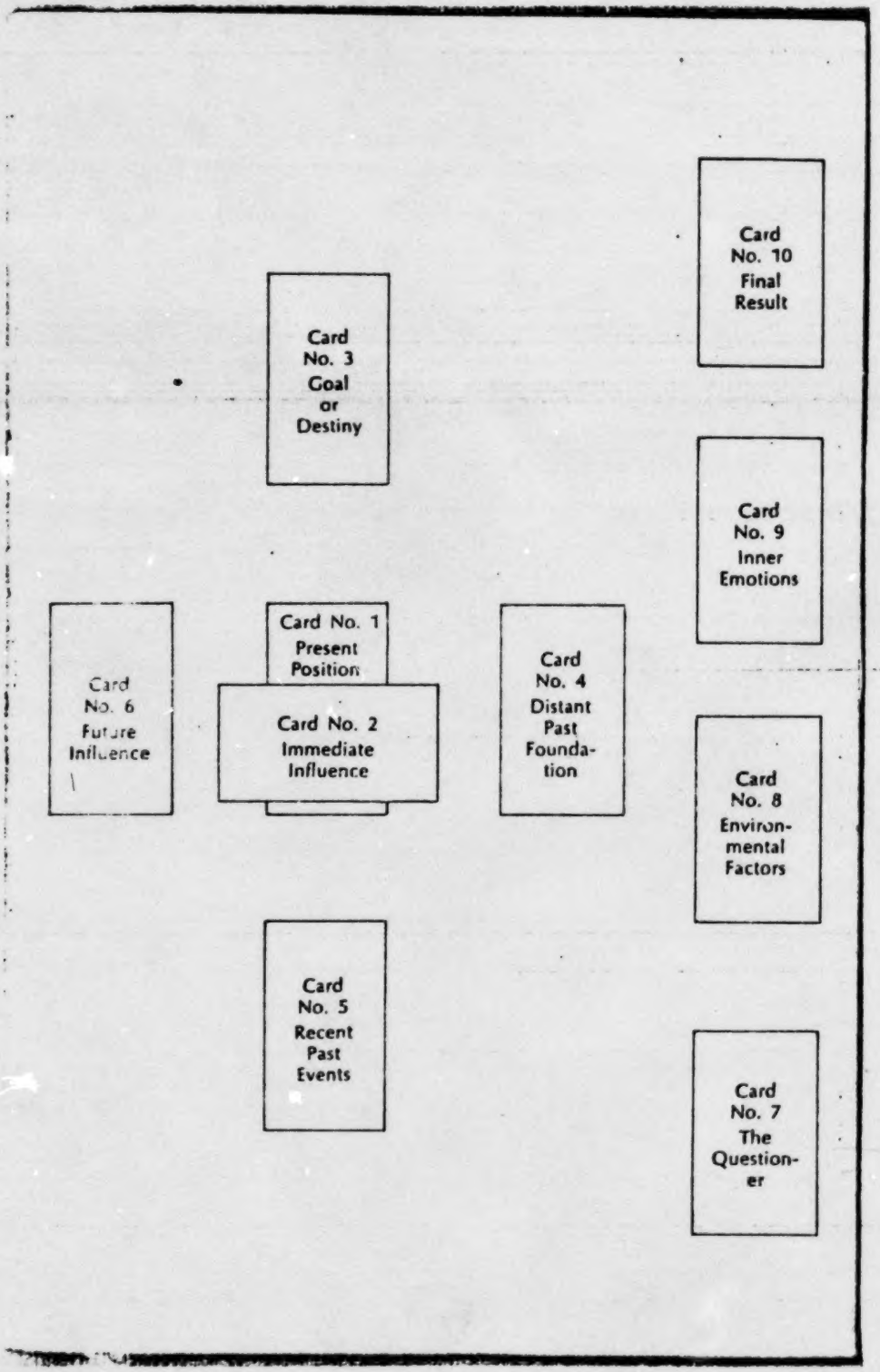
(9)

KEY 16
THE TOWER



KEY 21
THE WORLD

(10)


Card No. 10 Final Result
Card No. 3 Goal or Destiny
Card No. 9 Inner Emotions
Card No. 6 Future Influence
Card No. 1 Present Position
Card No. 2 Immediate Influence
Card No. 4 Distant Past Foundation
Card No. 8 Environmental Factors
Card No. 5 Recent Past Events
Card No. 7 The Questioner